

The Genealogist and the Library: An Interesting Partnership

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Abstract

*Genealogy is one of the most popular and fastest growing hobbies among Americans today. Experts give several reasons for this surge of interest in family history, among them Alex Haley's *Roots* and the easy access to genealogical information provided by the Internet. Ethnic groups especially have begun to delve into their heritage. In an attempt to better serve their patrons' needs, libraries have developed genealogical collections that range from small to extensive. Librarians are also beginning to adopt the Internet as an addition to the genealogical materials they have in print. The Internet provides a wealth of genealogical information, from passenger lists of the immigrants who came through Ellis Island to millions of vital records compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. As the interest in genealogy continues to grow, librarians will continue to develop and add to their genealogy collections in order to meet the demands of patrons seeking to discover their family history.*

They wait impatiently at the door for the library to open in the morning, and have to be booted out when the library closes at night. They are seldom seen without their accordion folders, briefcases, or yellow legal pads. They excel in asking questions that are extremely difficult for even the most learned librarian to answer. They are more serious about their research than doctoral candidates, and will engage a person in conversation for hours on end, painstakingly explaining the connection between their great-aunt Bertha and William the Conqueror. They can be some of the most exasperating and yet engaging patrons to frequent a library. They are the amateur genealogists.

The word genealogy derives from two Greek words meaning "family" and "study," and the origins of genealogy reach as far back as the Bible. Entire chapters in the Good Book are comprised of men with funny names begetting the next generation of men with funny names. Building on this, by medieval times, it was considered the duty of the Christian church to record familial relationships, and to this end, birth,

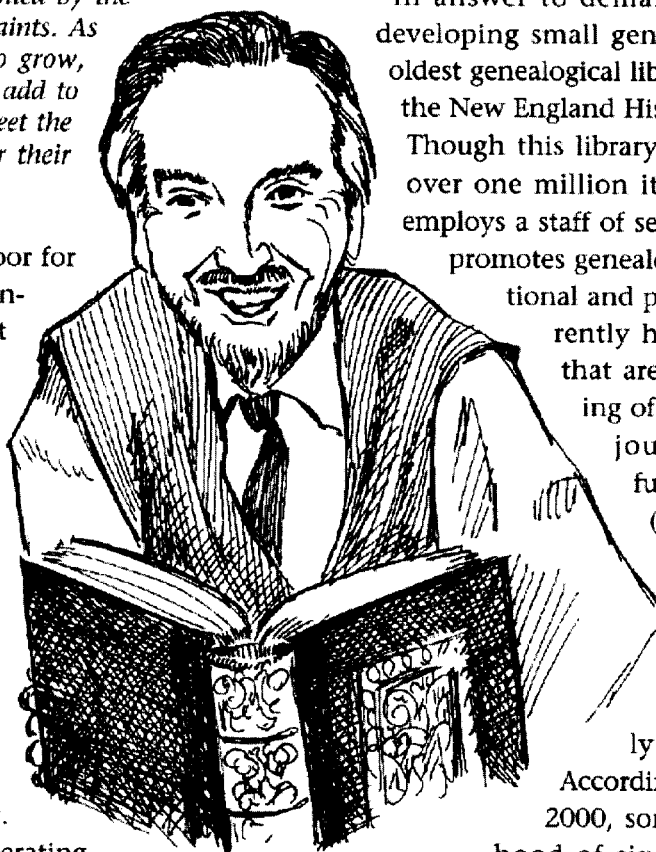
death, and marriage registers were kept. Also throughout history, land has passed from father to son, and this is another way of keeping track of a family's descendants. By the time America held the celebration of its centennial in 1876, a great number of immigrants from all parts of the world had flowed into the country. In response to this, societies such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Sons of the American Revolution were formed. These societies combined patriotic fervor with a propensity to crow about their early American lineage, which they felt made them superior to the new immigrants (Carmack 3).

In answer to demand, libraries soon began developing small genealogical collections. The oldest genealogical library in the United States is the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Though this library started small, it now has over one million items in its collection and employs a staff of seventy. The society actively promotes genealogical research with educational and publishing programs. It currently has two publishing houses that are responsible for the printing of four different genealogical journals. The Society also funds nation-wide seminars (Kemp 57).

Despite its historical precedents, genealogy as a hobby is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that is continually increasing in popularity.

According to a survey published in 2000, somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty percent of Americans

were currently researching their family history and heritage (Hantula 744). That number has grown even more in the years since the survey was published. So what has caused this explosion of interest in genealogy? Some possible explanations include Alex Haley's book *Roots*, the fact that the generation encompassing the parents of today's Baby Boomers is rapidly dying out, the easy accessibility of genealogical information on the Internet, and the flourishing curiosity of ethnic groups to discover their own unique heritage (Shute 76-77).



These ethnic groups are not located only in the United States. Although genealogical research has formerly been the realm of little old ladies whose blood was as blue as their hair, today people of all ethnic backgrounds are beginning to search for their roots. In May of 2001, the Hong Kong Central Library opened an exhibition called "Special Collections of Documents of Modern China." This exhibition was a joint effort put together by Hong Kong Public Libraries, the Shanghai Library, and the Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. There were over three hundred documents in the exhibition, and these included folk prints, rare books, correspondence handwritten by famous Chinese, and most interestingly, various genealogy manuscripts. The exhibition's purpose was to promote interest in Chinese culture and heritage ("HK Central Library").

It has long been a tradition in China for families to keep private archives of their own ancestry. A great many of these records were destroyed when the Communists took over China, and the Communist government as a rule prohibited access to genealogical records. However, the Shanghai Public Library has recently begun a race against time to conserve what is left of these *jiapu*, or Chinese genealogy records. The library's genealogy department has already conserved over 40,000 of these family volumes, and the work still continues (Ching). The projects going on at the Hong Kong Central Library and the Shanghai Public Library are just two illustrations of the curiosity that has developed in peoples all over the world to discover their heritage and family roots. Regardless of the reason for this curiosity, genealogists continue to pour into libraries in increasing numbers. Since the mission of the library is to provide its patrons with the information they seek, librarians must amass and become familiar with collections that are in demand by those seeking to delve into their family history. Because there are so many different genealogical sources, it is almost impossible for a library to build a collection that is all encompassing. However, by utilizing interlibrary loan and having cooperative acquisitions programs, even a small library can give its patrons effective access to the materials they need (Reid 52).

Judith P. Reid has published an extremely useful article detailing how a library can get started building its genealogy collection. The article provides a valuable annotated bibliography of must-have genealogical books. Among the books Reid suggests are *Unpuzzling Your Past: A Basic Guide to Genealogy*, *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, *Ancestry's Red Book:*

American State, County & Town Sources, *The Genealogist's Address Book*, *Directory of American Libraries with Genealogy or Local History Collections*, *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index*, and *Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives* (53-54). Although the initial outlay for all these books is a bit costly, there are other genealogical acquisitions that can be had for free.

Many genealogists will gladly donate folios of the research they have already done on their own families. In the Alabama Room of the Anniston-Calhoun County Public Library, many of the prominent families of Calhoun County have already been traced back several generations, and this information lies neatly in folders in a filing cabinet. Another way to acquire genealogical material free of charge is through cultivating a relationship with local colleges or universities. Students often perform in-depth genealogical research for the papers they write, and they would be only too happy to present their findings to the library. In accepting these kinds of genealogical gifts, it would perhaps be a good idea for the library to require documentation in order to assure the accuracy of these donations.

Once a substantial genealogical collection has been acquired, librarians often face the hated task of weeding. Since genealogical documents are essentially timeless, there is no need to weed out-of-date records. However, with libraries everywhere suffering from lack of room and no money to build larger buildings, the need for weeding in the genealogical department can be a matter of space, not the currency of the documents. As librarians at the Lake Lanier Regional Library in Georgia soon discovered, hell hath no fury like a genealogist who learneth his collection shall be weeded.

The conflict began in 1993 when a genealogical researcher learned that the library planned to pull approximately two hundred volumes on state history from its genealogy department shelves. This decision was made because the library felt that the state archives in Atlanta, the Georgia Room at the Marietta Public Library, and various university libraries were in a better position to provide access to materials for genealogical research. The library had the two hundred volumes examined by experts, who found only eight that they considered to be of significance to the state archives. The library intended to take a few of the volumes out of reference and put them into general circulation. The rest were to be sold. This, along with a similar situation at the Carroll County Public Library in Maryland, spawned an online protest on Prodigy, a national computer network. The libraries became buried under a

mountain of online complaints and challenges. Jo Ann Pinder, the director of Lake Lanier Regional Library, had underestimated her genealogists. She was totally astonished by this unanticipated reaction, and stated with shock, "I've been called the next Sherman, marching through the South" (Kniffel 111).

Though the directors of both these libraries claimed that they were "just doing their jobs," genealogists shot down this excuse more quickly than the prosecutors at Nuremberg had the Nazis' "just following orders" defense. Weeding is a fact of life in any library, but genealogical collections often contain documents that are fairly rare and, as such, genealogists protect them with ferocity. Regardless of whether or not a library makes the decision to weed certain items in the genealogy department, it would do well to remember that genealogists can be very vocal in their displeasure. Although it can be difficult to put an intrinsic value on some items in a library's collection, the genealogist has a point—there are millions of copies of Danielle Steel's latest book, but only one copy of his great-great-grandfather's estate records.

There is a great deal of mystery surrounding how the genealogist goes about his work. In her book *Long-Distance Genealogy*, Christine Crawford-Oppenheimer gives the basics that every amateur genealogist should know. The first rule is that, in researching a family history, the researchers must start with themselves and work backward. It may be enticing to discover a fabulously rich pirate with the same last name as one's own who reportedly buried his treasure for only his rightful heirs to find, and then attempt to connect one's descent with him. However, it is always easier to start with oneself and identify one's ancestors. In tracing his pirate ancestry, the genealogist will work with two kinds of sources, primary and secondary. Primary sources are contemporary sources made by witnesses of an event. Birth, death, and marriage certificates, baptismal records, and deeds are all primary sources. Secondary sources are created by someone who did not witness an event, and these sources can be made many years later. Crawford-Oppenheimer explains that published genealogies and county histories are both examples of secondary sources (5).

Once the amateur genealogist has learned the difference between primary and secondary sources, he can then begin his research. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* gives several pointers for the beginning genealogist:

- Set up a system for organizing the information you will accumulate.
- Start your data collection by writing down what you already know about your family.
- Gather together the documents in your home that may contain relevant data.
- Ask your relatives to write down what they know of family history.
- Record names, dates, and places accurately. Where feasible, make photocopies (744).

Since genealogists must sometimes travel long distances to gain access to the documents and records they seek, it is also important for them to know some basic details about their research destination. They must plan their research trip in order to make the most of the time they have. This planning includes finding out when the public library's genealogy room is open, as the library hours and the genealogy department hours are not always the same. It is also wise for the genealogist to prepare a list of questions about what the library's genealogical collection contains. This information, along with business hours or anything else the genealogist needs to know, can often be answered by a call or e-mail to the library (Thomas).

Although most would-be genealogists are amateurs seeking their own family history, there is such a thing as a professional genealogist. There are several ways to locate this elusive creature, and perhaps the best is to look in the *Association of Professional Genealogists Directory*. This source lists all of the association's members, their respective specialties, and a biography of each member. Professional genealogists usually charge for their services by the hour. The average going rate for a professional genealogist in his prime is anywhere from fifteen to thirty-five dollars an hour—not bad, considering that the only requirement necessary to become a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists is to pay dues. There is no accreditation or qualification process. However, there is a Board for Certification of Genealogists, and an organization called the Accredited Genealogists, so professionals certified and accredited in the field can be found by writing either of these organizations. Regardless of whether or not he is certified, the professional genealogist will require, in addition to his hourly fee, that all other expenses, such as photocopying, postage, travel, lodging, and the like, be paid by the person who hires him (Carmack 186-188). At these prices, it's no wonder that most people interested in their family history choose to research it themselves.

The prevailing first question asked by nearly every

prospective amateur genealogist once they get to the library is "But where do I start?" The second question is inevitably, "And all this stuff's on the Internet, right?" In the past, the only way to research genealogy was to go to the local courthouse or library and dig through mounds of dusty records. Today, America has become a society accustomed to instant gratification. To this end, there is a wealth of genealogical information that can be accessed by computer. The Internet has put genealogical information literally at one's fingertips. Many librarians are beginning to treat the Internet as an addition to their own print collections (Kemp 58).

Despite the amount of knowledge that can be gained from the Internet, it still cannot replace the knowledge that can be found in printed sources. Most genealogists wish to have copies of the actual scraps of paper that their ancestors wrote on.

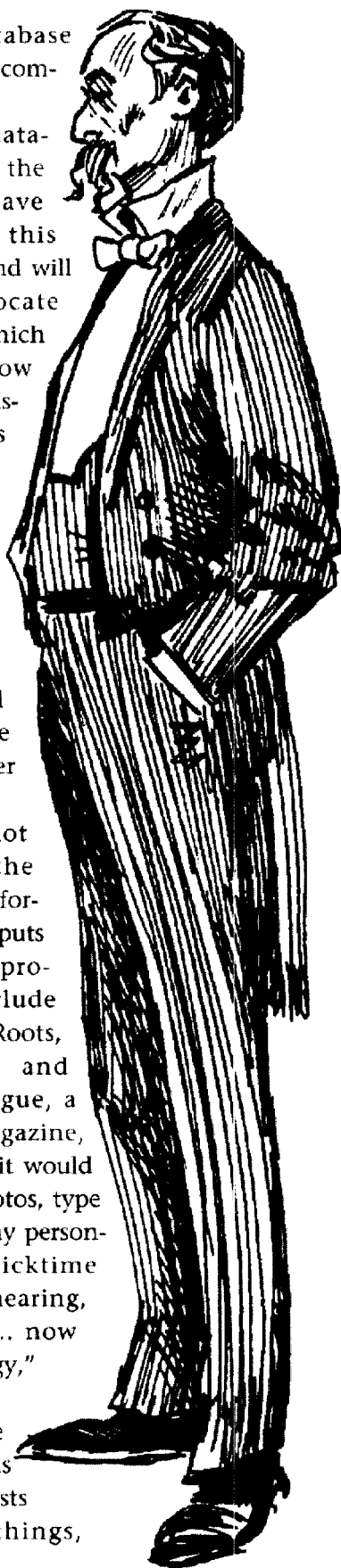
According to an article in *Time* magazine, roots seeking is a leading subject on the Internet. Rootsweb, which is a place for genealogists to swap information on the Internet, had over 160 million messages routed through its servers in just one month. Even the largest repository of genealogical records in the entire world, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, is getting into the Internet game. The church's website, www.familysearch.org, boasts over 600 million documents compiled by the Mormon church from vital records around the world (Hornblower et al). As impressive as this is, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is going even more high tech. In 2001, researchers at Brigham Young University's Molecular Genealogy Research Project began collecting blood samples for use in genealogical research. They have collected samples from New Zealand, Polynesia, and other locations, as well as the United States. After gathering at least 100,000 samples, the researchers plan to compare genetic markers to differentiate bloodlines. Utilizing a type of DNA analysis similar to that used in crime labs, the researchers will attempt to identify genetic patterns and trace them back to a certain time and place. They are hoping that this method will allow genealogists to continue following the family history trail, even if there are gaps in the printed sources, or confusion caused by adoption. After finishing the research, the results are to

be compiled into a database which can be accessed by computer (Wronski).

In addition to the databases being compiled by the Mormons, those who have ancestors who entered this country through Ellis Island will now find it easier to locate them and the ship on which they arrived. There is now computer access to the passenger lists of all the ships that brought immigrants into the United States by New York Harbor from 1890 to 1924. Also, the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. contains millions of federal records, and some of these are available by computer as well (Mitchell et al).

The computer has not only changed how the genealogist gathers his information, but also how he puts it together. Genealogy programs abound, and include Family Tree Maker, MacRoots, Family Heritage File, and Reunion 4.0. David Pogue, a writer for *Macworld* magazine, states, "Think how great it would be to slap in scanned photos, type up anecdotes, or even—my personal fantasy—import Quicktime home movies. Seeing, hearing, meeting your relatives... now that's what I call genealogy," (Pogue 147). Computer software engineers are now producing programs that will allow genealogists to do all of these things, and more.

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Most genealogists wish to have copies of the actual scraps of paper that their ancestors wrote on. Also, for every record that is found on the Internet, there is probably another one sitting on a library shelf somewhere that may never be posted to a server. One other major concern with genealogical information gained from the Internet is that much of it has no documentation, and therefore there is no way to assess its accuracy. For all of these reasons, as helpful as computers can be, the genealogist's best friend is still his local library.

What is it that possesses a person to spend hour upon hour in a library, searching for his family history? Ralph Roberts in his book *Genealogy Via the Internet* gives several different reasons. People like learning about other interesting people, and if those interesting people

are one's ancestors, then it is all the more engrossing. Most genealogists possess a certain curiosity where the past is concerned. Roberts contends that there are also those who, even if only subconsciously, hope to discover that they descend from nobility or royalty (28). However, perhaps the most trenchant force that drives a person to search for his family history is the search for self. By discovering our ancestors, we unearth our own history. We discover what makes us who we are. As one patron taking advantage of the newly opened archives at the Shanghai Public Library observed, "Water has a source, and trees have roots. People have ancestors," (Ching). As long as people continue to seek those ancestors, the library and the genealogist will have a successful and very interesting partnership.

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SOURCE: Ala Libr 53 no1 2003

WN: 0300106101003

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